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Shining stars

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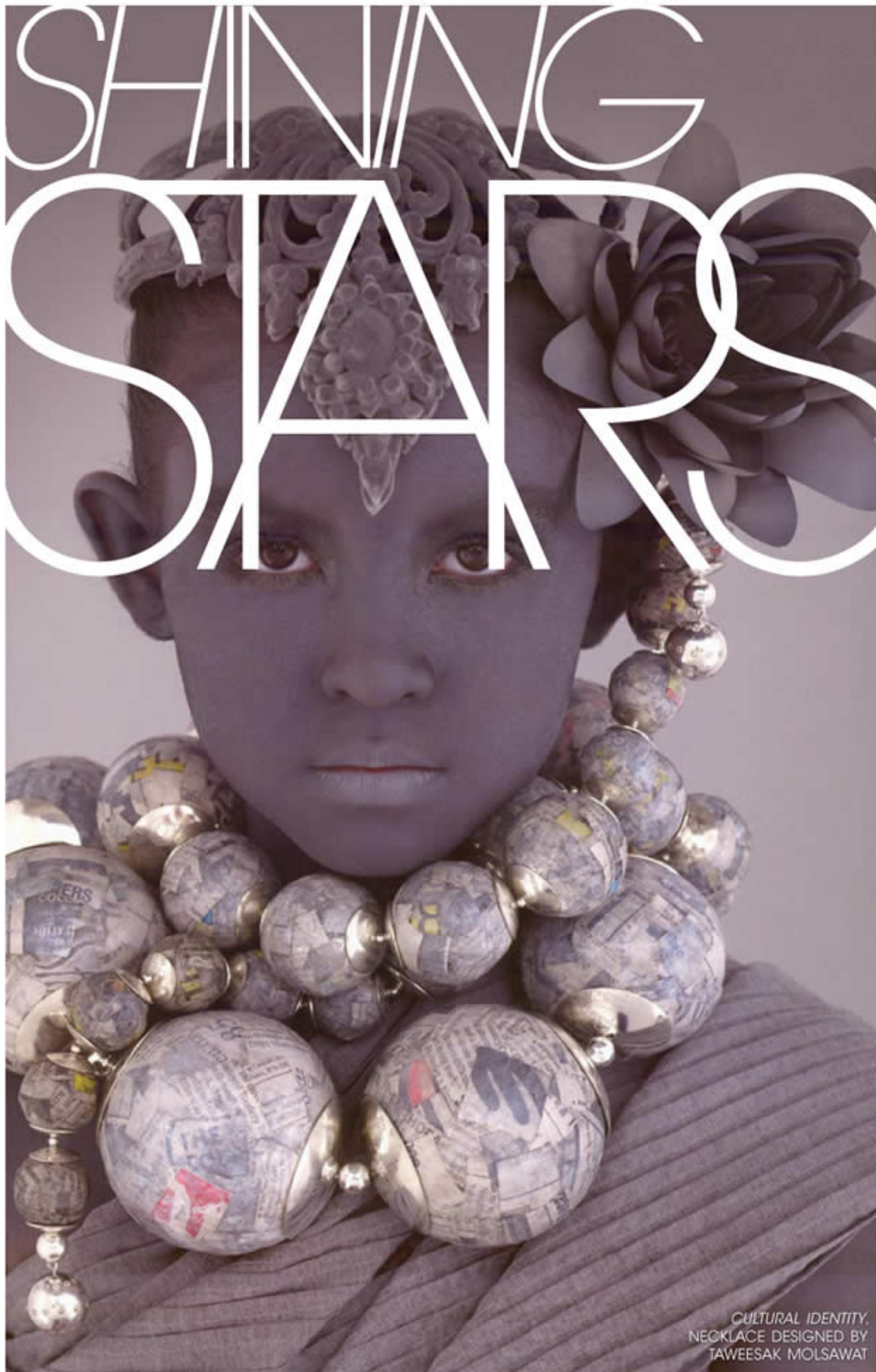
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CULTURAL IDENTITY.
NECKLACE DESIGNED BY
TAWEESAK MOLSAWAT

TAWEESAK MOLSAWAT

SUN JIE



Hong Kong has become one of the most important jewellery markets in the world and the region's success has attracted top-designers. **SUMMER CAO** met three of the industry's most charismatic talents to learn what directions it will take next and what role the HKDI can play in maintaining the city's reputation for creativity.

«ALTHOUGH JEWELLERY IS A FORM OF PERSONAL EXPRESSION FUNCTIONALITY IS ALSO IMPORTANT. TO MAKE SOMETHING BASED ON FEELINGS ALONE IS NAÏVE.»



CIRCLE. ARMPIECE DESIGNED BY FRANZ BETTE. OPPOSITE BELOW POETIC SPACE. WEARABLE AS A BROOCH DESIGNED BY FRANZ BETTE

FRANZ BETTE

"ORNAMENTATION CAN BE something other than beauty," says Franz Bette, an internationally renowned goldsmith who has been making jewellery for 60 years, the last five of those spent mostly in Hong Kong.

"Asians are very emotional people, and this is sometimes missing in European design," he says. "But maybe there is too much emotion in Asia. My aesthetic is different, based on geometry and mathematics, which are the basic elements of the universe. Although jewellery is a form of personal expression functionality is also important. To make something based on feelings alone is naïve."

Bette's philosophy can be seen clearly in his retrospective show *Ornament without Ornament*, which is a meditation on geometry, kinetics, and the algebra of time and space. The collection proves that geometric design can also be poetic and engaging, especially in works such as *Free Element* from the 80s and *Poetic Space* from the 2000s.

Ornament without Ornament reveals Bette to be a dreamer, with the soul of an engineer and physicist who guides his curiosity with precise analytical rigour.

"I am always curious about why things are as they are," he says. "For example I like rowing – rowing is like dancing, requiring four people to cooperate with precision – its kinetic progression inspires me, and the movement of the boat is like my nature. I would like to design boats and bikes."



HKDI: FRANZ BETTE



Bette became a product designer for Omega in the 70s, and also designed furniture, but his craving for more poetic forms of creation brought him back to jewellery, where his work reveals a unique fusion of art and science in pieces like "Crossing" which features a pair of scissors.

"Children should keep away of scissors and knives, but they like them. So I started to design something that cuts well but without sharp edges," he says. "This is exactly what true jewellery should be. It's like a pair of shoes – first they need to be comfortable and then one can add accessories, but in Hong Kong style often comes before function."

Despite his criticism, Bette is delighted to be part of Hong Kong's booming jewellery industry because "everything is happening in Asia. Hong Kong is a huge market for jewellery and what is happening here is so exiting for artists."

He also sees great potential in HKDI's programme to assemble international design talents to nurture and inspire students. "I like being part of HKDI because the process here is as much about doing as it is about learning. If my students want to make one ring, I suggest they make ten – the more hands-on experience they have, the better. I love physics, and science is all about experimentation."



Contemporary designers of Chinese origin are apt to have a sharper focus on expressions of feeling. It's not that Chinese designers have fewer scientific urges in their blood, but globalisation and the opening of Chinese society have made them keen to display emotions that have only recently been freed from shackles.

"Chinese contemporary jewellery design has only been developing for a decade, and it has been much slower to bloom than Chinese contemporary art," says Sun Jie, an award-winning Chinese jewellery designer based in Amsterdam. "During this time, jewellery design has ceased to be focused on commercial concerns and now leans toward culture and heritage. It has become more independent and individualistic."

Sun, a Guiyang-born designer, was brought up in an era when human expression was mostly restrained, as depicted in paintings like Zhang Xiaogang's *Bloodline*. He went to Beijing's Central Academy of Fine Arts before being admitted to Amsterdam's Gerrit Rietveld Academy, where his creativity began to blossom.

His latest designs have been suffused with emotion, a love of life and nature plus a hint of license mixed with self-indulgence. Each of Sun's pieces is accompanied by a poem or a short story to ensure its visual impact can sink in and reverberate, a process similar to the ancient tradition that was common in imperial China where text and image interacted in paintings.

In Sun's 2007 *Seed* collection, one poem reads "That day, in the water, I try my best to swim ahead, with the children/What do they think in the water?/I can hear my breathing clearly, just as I can hear the sound of splashing/Like the forests and rainstorms it seems I have heard a supernatural flower swaying in a mysterious garden./And then, I make an emotional splash and as the ripples disappear I discover I am sinking."

Sun believes that jewellery should, fundamentally, be a messenger, a carrier of thoughts and feelings about emotions. Even in his latest work about movements such as *Travelling in My Heart* and *Happiness*, the emphasis on emotion is telltale as suggested by the title. "The function of jewellery is beyond beauty and money, and it has meaning embedded," he said.

Sun arrived at HKDI in February, and under his guidance, students completed a creation titled *The Necklace of God*. "Most people forget to appreciate the rich and colourful world we have," he said. "Through this workshop I hope students can discover the freedom and flair of creativity, try to break some rules and search for the possibility of beauty among many different materials."

The designer was amazed by the students' passion toward jewellery design. "They have so much energy. Unlike students from mainland schools, they are eager to try different materials, and take great efforts to find them. I think this kind of passion is vitally important to succeed as a modern jewellery designer."

HAPPINESS.
BROOCH
DESIGNED BY
SUN JIE



SUN JIE

TAWEESEK MOLSAWAT



Thai designer Taweesak Molsawat combines social activism, sociology, anthropology and archaeology and his collection *This is Thailand: Thailand from 2006-present*, sought to reflect the ways we have taken advantage of Mother Nature. The collection is made from trash that has been miraculously transformed and given new life in Molsawat's hands.

"Jewellery's cultural function is beyond to decorate, to make things prettier," he says. "My work conveys the message that we need to be more honest with ourselves and each other about the impact we have had on the planet."

He labels the trash he collects from Thailand's beautiful beaches as "cultural leftovers" and says that his work has deliberately lowered the impact on the environment. "I haven't bought anything new, and have not left any impact on the environment in the whole jewellery-making process," he says. "Everything is made by hand. I want to show people that instead of being thrown away, these objects can be made into new objects of value."

ABOVE THIS IS THAILAND
NO.16. 11-23-2011.
PIN DESIGNED BY
TAWEESEK MOLSAWAT

Molsawat has recorded his entire creative process in a film that starts with his picking up trash, to cleaning and categorising it, to the environment-friendly techniques he uses to transform the garbage, such as stamping, drilling, banding, sawing and casting. The film reveals a confident designer who will work with anything put in front of him and is able to turn the most usual items into unique jewellery pieces, as if by magic.

Molsawat derives his Midas touch from his respect for life and nature, and a Buddhist heritage that gives him special insights into the cast-off objects he finds on beaches.

"They speak to me," he says. "I categorise them, examine them, study them and then give them stories. Some of the objects catch the eye easily, and are more recognisable, so I start with the ones that speak to me quickly and most clearly."

"For example, when I spotted a fish lure on a beach near a resort, it started talking to me immediately about the life of local fishing communities before the influence of capitalism became so strong through hotel development and a boom in tourism. Then I combined scraps of old US dollar bills with the fish lure. The dollar is a symbol of the tourism brought by capitalism and it contradicts the rhythm of local life, as expressed by the lure."

However, given the random nature of the materials he finds and the artist's commitment to having zero impact on environment, certain compromises have to be made to fuse his ideas and the available materials together.

"Jewellery is a visual language, besides technology and material compromises, the biggest challenge is colour," he says. "And the colour of trash is mostly dull."

With a combination of genius and perseverance Molsawat has overcome this difficulty by using natural products and believes he has "introduced another way of thinking to the jewellery industry" that allows for beauty and social activism to coexist. His work has won a strong following in Europe and the US but his aim is higher than popularity. This June, he will conduct a workshop at the HKDI to show fellow jewellery designers and students in Hong Kong that "We can do better" when it comes to combining creativity with concern for the environment and the people we share the planet with. Laid alongside the work of Bette and Sun, Molsawat's innovative approach is to help ensure that HKDI develops into a global centre for scholarship in jewellery design.

